

Eldergivers

Connecting the Generations

By Pam Hagen

[Eldergivers](#) is a San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit dedicated to connecting the generations through programs celebrating the wisdom, talents and creativity of older adults. We focus our resources primarily on seniors who reside in long-term care facilities (skilled nursing, assisted living, residential care) – those who require 24-hour care for some chronic illness. The majority is wheelchair-bound, the average age is 80, and reflects the racial, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of the Bay Area. Nationally, more than 60% of long-term care residents never have a visitor.



Cell

[Art With Elders](#) (AWE) was started in 1991. AWE places professional artists in these facilities to teach residents how to paint. AWE is a two-track fine arts education program offering weekly painting classes throughout the year and an exhibition schedule that gives residents the opportunity to show their work in public. AWE is a skills-building initiative. More than 80% of new participants have never had prior art experience. Participants learn to draw, to mix their own paints, apply theories of perspective and composition to whatever concept they wish to express, and explore different media – acrylic, watercolor, oil pastels, marker, pen and ink, collage, etc. Classes are two-hours long and meet once a

week for 50 weeks a year. Eldergivers, through its AWE program, currently provides fine arts classes to over 375 residents in more than 30 facilities throughout the Bay Area.



In the Classroom

Medicare, Medicaid and Medi-Cal facilities serve the very poor. As a result, these sites focus on their primary responsibility – providing residents with medical care. There are few, if any, funds or activities that stimulate the emotional, intellectual, spiritual or creative aspects of residents' lives. Art programming is non-existent except for some arts and crafts and projects that entail holiday decorating.

With a California Arts Council grant through the [Creating Public Value \(CPV\) Program](#) in 2011, Eldergivers was able to add another three long-term care sites in Alameda County that only accept low-income Medicare and Medi-Cal clients and without prior art programming. We offered them six months of AWE, free, if they would then consider taking on at least a portion of the cost of the program to continue classes beyond the end of the trial period.



Oranges or Persimmons?

Art can be a powerful connector.

Residents in these three sites, who were hungry for something more substantial than bingo or TV, were provided with weekly painting classes allowing them to explore latent creativity, socialize with peers in small groups, and share their artwork through Eldergivers' public exhibitions. Residents who were depressed and who had withdrawn from contact with themselves and with other residents, came out of their shells and began engaging with others as a result of participating in AWE.

Much of the success of the program in these three new facilities has to do with the teacher we hired for the project – Zarouhie Abdalian.

Zarouhie is a graduate of California College of the Arts which has a graduate curricula strongly focused on social arts practice. Zarouhie is not only a very effective teacher, she is equally good at building community among her students. She explains that one way in which she does this is to engage in regular critiques of students' work. "The critiques are short and simple. I hold up one or two pieces of artwork at a time and initiate some discussion of their aesthetic and conceptual strengths. I have been amazed at how isolated many of the students are and that they do not generally talk to one another during the day. The critique changes this. Everyone has been very positive and encouraging with their fellow students."



Zarouhie with Student

Zarouhie goes on to say "The staff tells me that some of my students have been more social since being in the class and staff has directed people to the class who were becoming increasingly isolated and depressed – with positive results."

The success of the program is also contingent on the response by the activity staff in these facilities. Activity Directors originally accepted our offer of free classes and then, based on the great success of the program, advocated with their administrators or facility owners to pick up at least partial costs of AWE going forward.



Untitled Works

Recently, an Activity Director at one of the Medi-Cal sites was showing an AWE staff member the artwork of a very elderly African-American gentleman when she burst into tears. “He rarely speaks,” she explained. She feels he has hidden talents that were never explored when he was younger. Now he makes as many as five paintings during a class period. When the classes started several months ago, his paintings were mainly very dark; now they have much more color in them. She feels this is at least partially because his talent is being recognized in class. AWE is the only activity he participates in. “He has found a way to communicate.”

This CPV project has been particularly successful for Eldergivers and we plan to use this strategy again when introducing AWE into additional facilities. Given their very modest activity budgets, the fact that all three sites have decided to continue AWE at least partially at their own expense, says volumes about the value to seniors of an active art practice.

Our goal is not only to provide classes to our elders in long-term care facilities, but also to share their creativity with the larger community.



20th Annual Exhibit

Eldergivers is currently preparing for its 21st Annual Art With Elders Exhibit, to be opened to the public at Mission Bay Conference Center at UC San Francisco, September 23rd, with a gala reception for the artists. Ninety-three seniors from the 35 facilities that participate in the AWE program will be featured, including one artist from each of the three new facilities in the program.



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Exhibiting Artist

Following this event, the new show moves to City Hall in San Francisco for a three-month period. The lower level gallery is a very popular venue for the arts and gets a lot of foot traffic. The San Francisco Arts Commission will host a reception for Eldergivers open to the public on October 3rd. We will take advantage of this venue especially to promote the practice of art and to celebrate AWE among politicians, civic leaders, our own supporters as well as the public at large.

All photos by Guy Poole

Eldergivers receives funding from the California Arts Council's [Creating Public Value Program](#), which supports arts organizations in rural and underserved communities, and is managed by Lucero Arellano larellano@cac.ca.gov.

